



Beryl Fernandes

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"To be effective in the environmental world, the environmental field needs to be based not only in science but in a number of disciplines, depending on the project or problem." Beryl Fernandes, 2005.

Overview

Beryl was born and raised through high school on the island of Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean off the coast of East Africa. She won an academic scholarship to and graduated from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. She earned an interdisciplinary Ph.D. from the University of Washington in Seattle, which included research at Linköping University in Sweden. She is now a consultant and holds Executive positions with local, state government and nonprofit organizations for over 20 years.

Early career focused on technical and policy work in urban and environmental planning including drinking water, wastewater, solid waste management, recycling, energy conservation, transportation alternatives, visioning, community and economic development. Her current focus is on management consulting, helping organizations and public agencies achieve more with fewer resources by increasing efficiency, accountability, equity and quality of service using a variety of approaches including Lean Business Practices and Project Management principles. She is an avid outdoorsperson and distance cyclist, and has served as an outdoor leader for underserved students and women cancer survivors.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

Beryl Fernandes was born and raised in Zanzibar, East Africa and has since spent the majority of her life in Seattle, Washington. Beryl grew up with five brothers while her father worked for the Public Works Department, and her mother was a homemaker. Coming from a family with no funds to send children to college, she learned to be self-reliant at an early age. She earned scholarships to Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania where she received a bachelor's degree in philosophy with a minor in sociology. Fernandes later got an interdisciplinary doctorate in urban planning and environmental engineering from the University of Washington in Seattle. Fernandes is an avid outdoors person and appreciates having well-preserved, natural environments in which to hike, backpack, climb, ski, kayak, run, and cycle.

Fernandes became interested in a career in the environment when she and some of her neighbors worked to restore Thornton Creek, a polluted urban stream that drained into Lake Washington. This effort began a discussion about developing a mechanism to address other urban drainage problems; the campaign culminated in the establishment of the Seattle Drainage Utility. This project was a catalyst for Fernandes, exposing her to the scientific as well as the socio-political issues involved in doing environmental work. The project left a lasting appreciation for the work, challenges of citizen volunteers and the need to approach environmental stewardship from a community-based perspective. The Thornton Creek project also highlighted the interconnectedness of multiple disciplines and perspectives and shaped Fernandes's decision to pursue an interdisciplinary doctorate.

The first environmental job Fernandes had was as a county recycling policy manager, followed by the positions of lead policy analyst and advisor to the Snohomish County Council and Seattle City Council. She was also the executive director of the Seattle Urban Resources Partnership; a program that used federal grants with local matches to fund environmental projects specifically earmarked for low-income, inner city communities. She has also served as Regional Director for the Washington State Department of Ecology, as well as headed her own consulting firm.

Career

Fernandes is currently the president of Fernandes & Associates, Inc., an urban, regional and environmental planning consulting firm in Seattle. Her consulting projects range from environmental and community conflict resolution and mediation, to collaborative planning, multi-cultural community engagement, sustainable development, environmental impact analysis, urban planning, policy analysis and development, and program evaluation. She has worked on contentious projects where she succeeded in bringing about mutually satisfying solutions, resulting in long-term collaboration among opponents.

Fernandes has also lectured and conducted seminars for professionals and students. She has served on numerous boards and commissions, including the Seattle Planning Commission, and the King Country Growth Management Commission. Maintaining an active presence and contact with low-income and communities of color through volunteer work has always been important to Fernandes. As an outdoor activity leader – she enjoys taking inner-city kids and juvenile offenders hiking, backpacking, and snowshoeing. She also volunteers with projects providing access to technology and training for inner-city youths.

Highlights

The highlight of Fernandes' career came when she had the opportunity to provide environmental grant funds to low-income, inner-city communities of color so that they could develop their projects. "It was incredibly satisfying to work with youth and adults of color and share their excitement in participating in environmental stewardship." Additional highlights include being asked to brief cabinet members in Washington, DC and an award for outstanding service from the former undersecretary for Natural Resources and the Environment, James Lyons. The lowest point of her career was realizing that there has been very little progress in diversifying the environmental profession in the twenty-first century.

Despite the challenges, Beryl Fernandes has remained in the environmental field and has accomplished a great deal. She has been recognized locally, nationally, and internationally for her work, and this recognition makes her confident that she is an effective mentor and role model for many young people of color. Fernandes considers her role in providing access and exposure to other people of color, especially youth, into the environmental field a significant achievement. She also cites her role in bringing attention to the lack of diversity in the field and the negative impact this has on minority communities as another major achievement. Fernandes has been involved in diversity programs with the University of Washington, the American Planning Association, The Professional Planner's Council, inner-city youth outdoor leadership programs, the state of Washington governor's office, and in legislative and natural resource agencies.

Mentoring Others

Fernandes is a strong supporter of mentoring programs and has been a mentor to minority students from elementary to university levels. She has provided them with access and exposure to the environmental field through outdoor activities, urban stream restoration, and community garden projects. Additionally, she has offered guidance to her mentees and has helped place people in various job positions, stressing the importance of helping others in a similar way. "To be effective in the environmental world, the environmental field needs to be based not only in science but in a number of disciplines, depending on the project or problem."

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Brian Mar, Fernandes' first professor of color, is cited as her mentor. He was the first person to take an interest in her academically and professionally, "he was a brilliant, creative scholar who encouraged and supported me as I charted my own course in the field." Mar's influence has helped Beryl to stick with a career in the environment, despite the enormous challenges of being the first and only person of color in most of the environmental jobs she has held. Fernandes emphasizes that the perspectives that people of color bring to the field are often unique, invaluable, and under-appreciated. "A look at the demographic make-up of our communities, with the large, growing minority populations very quickly suggests that the inclusion of minorities in the environmental field, their engagement in developing solutions, is not only desirable – but indispensable."

Advice to Young Professionals

Fernandes cautions minorities considering a career in the environmental field that getting into environmental professions can be tough because the job descriptions and criteria for success tend to favor those already in the agencies or organizations. "Survival can also be a challenge because there are so few minorities and often little support from others." Being prepared for an insulated field with few people of color can help, especially if one acts proactively to develop an appropriate support network. Fernandes continues to develop networks to improve the diversification of the environmental field and working on empowering people of all ages who have worked with her.